DENOUNCEMENT OF RAILROAD BILL WHICH PROTECTS CORPORATION INTEREST AND DESTROYS HUMAN RIGHTS

SPEECH

OF

HON. WILLIAM J. BURKE

OF PENNSYLVANIA

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FEBRUARY 21, 1920

WASHINGTON
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
1920

166705—20522

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HON. WILLIAM J. BURKE.

CONFERENCE REPORT ON THE RAILROAD BILL.

Mr. BURKE. Mr. Speaker, this bill is one of the most nefarious one-sided measures ever offered a legislative body for action. It hurls insult and defiance in the face of 2,000,000 railroad men, and it is an affront to every Member of Congress who believes in a "square deal" and common justice to the working people. [Applause.]

The bill gives the railroad corporations of the country everything that they desire; it presents them with $300,000,000 of the people's money to finance them, guarantees them 6 per cent on their stocks and bonds, perpetuates the freight rates set up during the period of war, and provides the way for their further increase.

The bill, indeed, provides generously for the welfare of corporate interest, but in no spot or place has protection been accorded the public or the great army of railroad employees. This bill as reported by the conference committee places property rights above human rights; it makes the rights of capital superior to the rights of the common people.

On November 14 last, after a hard battle, a bill passed this House carrying with it a fairly decent labor section, and while it was not altogether satisfactory it was accepted because it did protect the employees of the railroads, in so far as it perpetuated the wages and working conditions granted them by the United States Government. This House bill also took good care of the railroads; it provided them with a revolving fund of $250,000,000, and through its provisions assured the railroads that they would prosper on their return to private ownership, but because it contained a fair labor section it was not satisfactory to the "big interests" of the country, and I have received in my office booklets and pamphlets calling attention to the good features of the bill that protected the railroads but declaring it was inconceivable that Congress knew what it was doing when it passed the bill with the Anderson amendment perpetuating the wages and conditions granted the employees of the railroads by the Government. I am led to believe, too, that possibly this had something to do with the side tracking of the House bill and is the reason for the present damnable, drastic bill which ties the railroad men hand and foot being substituted in its place.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MANN of Illinois). The time of the gentleman from Pennsylvania has expired.

Mr. BURKE. Will the gentleman let me have five minutes more?

Mr. SIMS. Mr. Speaker, I yield five minutes more to the gentleman.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The gentleman is recognized for five minutes more.

Mr. BURKE. This bill, with its compulsory-arbitration board, is no more like the bill that passed the House last November than day is like unto night.

True, it takes better care of the corporate interest, but not one atom of protection is accorded the great army of workers. It deals a body blow to their organized efforts to at any time attempt to better their condition or secure an increase in wages, because the compulsory railroad labor board established is aimed to destroy the railroad organizations.

This bill makes sure in more ways than one that the men are tied. It gives the railroad managements the privilege of having the compulsory board interfere if the management even suspects there will be any trouble. It plays further into the hands of the managements, in so far as a petition signed by 100 unorganized workers could have the board interfere in any dispute, and it leaves the board free to act of its own accord and intervene in any wage dispute. The railroad employees have no choice but to go to the board. They are forced under this bill to accept the findings of the board. What an injustice! What a crime against a loyal and law-abiding class of American citizens!

The talk going around of it being necessary to do something to prevent strikes will not deceive anyone; it is all tommy-rot, and is only an excuse to hide behind doing what the "big interests" of the country want done, and to detract the attention of the public from other features of the bill. For 35 years there has been no nation-wide strike; the men have gone along and settled their own differences, and it has not taken a compulsory board, established for corporate interest, composed of nine members, comprising six against one, at a salary of $10,000 each per year, or $90,000 yearly, of the people's money, to effect a settlement.

Let me say to this Congress that compulsory arbitration is just as objectionable to the American people as antistrike legislation; and there is a reason for it, for the working classes have always received the worst of it when their differences were submitted to arbitration.

However, so that no Member of Congress may deceive himself, or attempt to justify his action in voting for this bill, which in its present shape is considered by the working people of the country as an outrageous encroachment upon their constitutional rights, let me say, that there is just as much antistrike in this bill as in the original Cummins bill passed by the Senate. The wording may be changed, the issue beclouded, but the antistrike feature is embodied in the compulsory board established, and the rights of the railroad employees jeopardized.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The time of the gentleman from Pennsylvania has again expired.

Mr. BURKE. Will the gentleman give me just one minute more?

Mr. SIMS. The gentleman has the right to extend his remarks.

Mr. BURKE. Just one minute more. I want to finish this statement.

Mr. SIMS. I yield to the gentleman one minute.

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Mr. BURKE. Just think of it! The railroad employees are to have a board to regulate their wages and working conditions; a board with authority to reduce wages if it sees fit. But the meat packers of the country can fix the price of meat without any interference by a board; the shoe manufacturers of the country can fix the price of shoes; the clothing manufacturers, the price of clothing; the food profiteers and all the exploiters in the necessities of life can establish their own prices without any tribunal to interfere. But the men whose lives are daily endangered by their work, who earn their wages honestly, must pay the prevailing prices in food and clothing, for he has no say in the matter, and the only restrictions made upon him is that he must have no say in regard to his own wages or working conditions. A board established by law will decide that matter for him.

When the President, in taking over the railroads, declared that they were the arteries of the Nation's life and called on the railroad employees to do their part and keep the trains moving, the men responded with a generosity and a loyalty unequaled in history. All through the period of the war they stood at their post of duty; they kept troop trains moving, equipment trains going, and when other fields of labor offered better opportunity they remained at their post because they were skilled in the work, experienced in their line of duty, and though the wages they received were insufficient and far less attractive than those paid in other lines of work, the railroad man considered himself as a soldier on duty; he placed his country's interest above his personal interest and was faithful to his duty, because no inexperienced man could do his work.

It is a poor return for their loyalty and a scant appreciation of their services to attempt now to restrict them of their rights and to hamper them in such manner as to prevent them getting a "square deal."

The railroad men desire a continuation of Government ownership for at least two years in order that it might be thoroughly tested, but as this Congress is determined to return the roads at any cost, and Government ownership seems out of the question, then I believe the least thing Congress can do is to send this bill back to the conference committee with instructions to bring in a bill with a fair and decent labor section; to be just as generous to the human interest as it has been to the corporate interest.

This Congress can not justify the passage of any bill which places the value of corporate wealth above the value of human rights, and no member can ever justify his position or explain to the American people why he votes to protect the railroad corporations of the country and to destroy the constitutional rights of 2,000,000 American citizens. [Applause.]

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WASHINGTON : GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1920